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John L. Fowles

Introduction

The book of Helaman portrays a fifty year period just preceding the birth of the Messiah and the eventual coming of the Lord to the Nephites (51–1 BC). In it Mormon identifies the problems facing the Nephites at that time, including the wickedness of the Church members. Even though there were times of prosperity, a great part of this period was filled with contention, pride, desire for riches, oppression, denying the spirit of revelation, plundering, lying, stealing, murdering, and adultery (Hel 4:12). He retells example after example of the wicked state of the Nephites and the Church, noting that even during peaceful times, they became proud because of their increased prosperity and riches (3:36).

Mormon reminds his modern-day readers that because he can tell only a hundredth part of the history (Hel 3:13–16), he must necessarily choose what to include. Consequently, the narratives he chose in the book of Helaman, plus his own editorial comments, warn his future readers of the prevailing conditions that will also exist in modern-day society. Seeing the parallel to our day, President Benson declared that we live in a day of great challenge as did the Nephites. Peace has been taken

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from the earth and the devil is reigning in “power over his own dominion” (“The Power of the Word” 79). Satan is waging war against the members of the Church who have testimonies and are trying to keep the commandments.

To help us more fully understand our own situation compared to that presented in the book of Helaman, this paper will identify the underlying problem during these decades which caused such unrighteousness to come among the Nephite culture. It will also discuss the method used by faithful Nephite and Lamanite leaders to try to reclaim their people from their unrighteousness in order to prepare them to be there to receive the Lord when he came to the temple at Bountiful. Referring to President Benson’s emphasis on the Book of Mormon, this paper will lastly examine the book of Helaman as a record of the type of the wickedness we see in our day and as a guide to how we can overcome that wickedness to be worthy to meet Christ at his second coming.

Rejection of the Covenant

After writing a commentary in the book of Alma on the fourteen years of war, Mormon continues to tell the story of the decline of the Nephites in the book of Helaman. He continually illustrates how the Nephites had become stiffnecked and refused to keep the commandments or laws of God. However, by the time of the book of Helaman, the Nephites had trampled the words of God under their feet and were sinning against great knowledge (Hel 4:13, 21–22; 7:24). Despite Captain Moroni’s teaching that they owed all of their happiness to the “maintenance of the sacred word of God” (Alma 44:5), the Nephites did not keep the covenant they had made with God. Consequently, the Spirit of the Lord could no longer dwell with them or preserve them (Hel 4:24; Alma 7:21).

To understand the consequences of the Nephites’ rejection of the covenant, we should first understand the connections between accepting the word of God and covenanting with God.

The Book of Mormon confirms the association in other scriptures of the words *covenant*, *law*, *word*, and *everlasting gospel*. As Abinadi preached to King Noah and his priests, he showed how accepting and living according to the word of God and by extension the covenant with God insures eternal life:

Behold I say unto you, that whosoever has heard the words of the prophets, yea, all the holy prophets who have prophesied concerning the coming of the Lord—I say unto you, that all those who have hearkened unto their words, and believed that the Lord would redeem his people, and have looked forward to that day for a remission of their sins, I say unto, that these are his seed, or they are the heirs of the kingdom of God. For these are they whose sins he has borne; these are they for whom he has died, to redeem them from their transgressions. (Mosiah 15:11–12)

It appears that words such as covenant, law, word, or oath were used almost synonymously in the Old Testament as well. G. E. Mendenhall has posited:

In view of the fact that the term for “covenant” is quite rare in the earliest sections of the OT, the tradition of the covenant with Yahweh must have been designated by other words than [*berit*]. It seems quite likely that the oldest designation of the Decalogue as . . . “the ten words” . . . rests on this early tradition, since covenants were regarded and called the “words” of the suzerain. The theological usage of the “word” of God may therefore be very closely bound up in its very origin with the covenant, though, of course, much expanded in scope with the passage of time. (716)

Even the name “Deuteronomy,” which means “second law,” comes from the Greek Septuagint which is actually a mistranslation of the earlier Hebrew term *debarim* or *words*. Therefore, the book of Deuteronomy is in reality the book of the “Words of the Covenant” (Grant 143).

In the book of Numbers, the relationship between the *word* and the *covenant* is also shown when Moses taught the heads of the tribes of Israel that when they made an oath or vow to the Lord they should never break their *word* or anything that proceeded out of their *mouth* (Num 30:2). Or when the Chronicler stated, “He is the Lord our God; his judgments are

in all the earth. Be ye mindful always of his covenant; the word which he commanded to a thousand generations; even of the covenant which he made with Abraham, and of his oath unto Isaac; and hath confirmed the same to Jacob for a law, and to Israel for an everlasting covenant” (1 Chr 16:14–17). Elder Boyd K. Packer has also noted that, “A covenant is a sacred promise, as used in the scriptures, a solemn, enduring promise between God and man. The fulness of the gospel itself is defined as the new and everlasting covenant” (23). Making a covenant involves our accepting the words of God and promising to live by them.

At the beginning of the Book of Mormon, Nephi explained that the phrase “to trample under their feet the God of Israel” means that “they set him at naught, and hearken not to the voice of his counsels” (1 Nephi 19:7). This is what the Nephites had done. Despite their covenants, they had rejected the word of the Lord as delivered by past and present prophets. The apostle Paul also understood the consequences of rejecting the Lord in this manner when he said to the Hebrews, “Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace?” (Heb 10:29)

As mentioned above, the Nephites were often described as being “stiffnecked” (Hel 4:21). Quite specifically, this spiritual condition could represent their refusal or inability to bow their heads in humble reverence to God. Symbolically, stiffneckedness also refers to the Nephites’ pride and prosperity, which led to their rejection of the covenant as represented by the word of God. Throughout the Book of Mormon, and especially in the book of Helaman, Mormon ties pride to wickedness. During Samuel the Lamanite’s scathing address against the Nephites’ pride, Mormon editorializes that “the people began to harden their hearts, all save it were the most believing part of them, both of the Nephites and also of the Lamanites, and began to depend upon their own strength and upon their own wisdom”

(16:15). As an additional demonstration of pride, Mormon tells us that these disbelievers could not accept the teachings of the prophet Samuel because they were not reasonable to them and they could not “witness with [their] own eyes that they [were] true” (vv 18, 20).

In addition to his statements against pride, Mormon reminds us that much of the wickedness among the Nephites arose from dissenters who had joined the Lamanites to stir them up to anger against their brethren (Hel 3:3; 4:1). These dissenters were those who had been once enlightened by the Spirit of God and had had great knowledge pertaining to righteousness. Because of transgression, however, many became hardened in their hearts, and their state became worse than if they had never known the ways of the Lord (Alma 24:30). They had dissented from their covenants and rejected the word of God. Mormon likened their condition to an unholy temple. The Spirit of the Lord could not dwell with them anymore because they were unworthy (Hel 4:24).

The problem of the Gadianton robbers is also first mentioned in the book of Helaman. This secret organization, along with pride and the Nephite dissenters, became a major problem for the righteous during this period. Like the proud and disbelieving Nephites, the Gadianton robbers had rejected the words of the covenant and had become a law unto themselves. Their organization was set up in rebellion against the believing Nephites and Lamanites. Mormon tells us that the Gadianton robbers, in imitation of the covenant, had their own secret words, signs, and oaths (see Hel 2). The band of Kishkumen had entered into a covenant, “swearing by their everlasting Maker, that they would tell no man that Kishkumen had murdered Pahoran” (1:11). Further, Gadianton taught them through the use of “many words” to carry out the secret work of murder and robbery (2:4). From his vantage point of abridging the records around AD 385, Mormon resolutely tells us that the Gadianton problem “did prove the overthrow, yea, almost the

entire destruction of the people of Nephi” (v 13). They did this by gaining entrance into the hearts of the Nephites.

The ending chapters of the book of Helaman contain the story of Samuel the Lamanites’ mission to the Nephites. He warned the Nephites that within 400 years the sword of justice would hang over them because of their rejection of the word of God or covenant of the Lord (Hel 13:5). Specifically, because of the hardness of the hearts of the people, the Lord would take away his word and Spirit from among them (v 8). The Nephites not only rejected the word of the Lord, but they also rejected Samuel, a living prophet, who had come to testify of their sins and iniquities. Instead of repenting, they were angry with him because he forced them to acknowledge their wickedness (vv 26–27). Nephite dissenters and Gadianton robbers became the ultimate symbol of rejection of the covenant and word of God as delivered by the prophets during this period.

Return to the Covenant

Mormon explains that the answer to the wickedness among the Nephites and the disbelieving Lamanites was to have the “word of God” preached unto them. Just as Alma left the judgment-seat to recover his people, so does Nephi₂, son of Helaman₂, yield up the judgment-seat to preach the word of God all the remainder of his days to bring his people to a remembrance of their God (Hel 5:4). At the end of the book of Helaman, Samuel describes the way many of the Lamanites were reclaimed from spiritual darkness: they were “brought to the knowledge of the truth, and to know of the wicked and abominable traditions of their fathers” (v 7). These converts were “led to believe the holy scriptures, yea, the prophecies of the holy prophets, which are written, which leadeth them to faith on the Lord, and unto repentance, which faith and repentance bringeth a change of heart unto them” (v 8). These Lamanite converts remained firm, steadfast, and feared to sin anymore (Hel 15:7–8).

Nephi and Lehi tried to bring their people back to a remembrance of the covenant by preaching the word of God to them. The preaching of the word was the instrument of salvation. Samuel the Lamanite told his Nephite audience that salvation had come to his people through the preaching of the Nephites (Hel 15:4). Commenting earlier on Alma's mission to reclaim the Zoramites, Mormon said, "The preaching of the word had a great tendency to lead the people to do that which was just—yea, it had had more powerful effect upon the minds of the people than the sword, or anything else, which had happened unto them—therefore Alma thought it was expedient that they should try the virtue of the word of God" (Alma 31:5).

The book of Helaman illustrates this precept by showing the great tendency for the preaching of the word bringing the people to a remembrance of God and their covenant with him. Mormon explains that the records he is editing testify:

that whosoever will may lay hold upon the word of God, which is quick and powerful, which shall divide asunder all the cunning and the snares and the wiles of the devil, and lead the man of Christ in a strait and narrow course across that everlasting gulf of misery which is prepared to engulf the wicked—and land their souls, yea, their immortal souls, at the right hand of God in the kingdom of heaven, to sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and with Jacob, and with all our holy fathers, to go no more out. (Hel 3:29–30)

Mormon tells us that Nephi and Lehi were highly successful in bringing "many of those dissenters [back] who had gone over from the Nephites, insomuch that they came forth and did confess their sins and were baptized unto repentance, and immediately returned to the Nephites to endeavor to repair unto them the wrong which they had done" (Hel 5:17). Moronihah, along with Nephi and Lehi, preached "many things unto the people because of their iniquity." Many repented and began to prosper in the land which is one of the blessings of being obedient to the covenant (4:14–15). Mormon also relates that in 30 BC righteous Lamanites were endeavoring to preach the word of God to rebelling Nephites. On this occasion, the

Nephites were brought back down “into the depths of humility, to be the humble followers of God and the Lamb” (Hel 6:5). Indeed, there were some good years in the book of Helaman when there was “great joy and peace, yea, much preaching and many prophecies” (6:14).

The book of Helaman consistently shows that the way to reclaim those who have rejected the covenant is to preach the word of God to them with power (5:17). Those who have the word of God preached unto them still have their agency to accept or reject it. Not everyone will accept the gospel. Even Nephi was not successful as when he journeyed to the land northward to preach to Nephite dissenters (7:2–3). However, those who have ears to hear will hear.

Latter-day Parallels and Warnings

According to President Benson, the Book of Mormon contains a pattern for those of us in the latter-days to follow. In the 1986 October general conference he stated: “In the Book of Mormon we find a pattern for preparing for the Second Coming. A major portion of the book centers on the few decades just prior to Christ’s coming to America. By careful study of that time period, we can determine why some were destroyed in the terrible judgments that preceded His coming and what brought others to stand at the temple in the land of Bountiful and thrust their hands into the wounds of His hands and feet” (“The Book of Mormon” 6–7). In other words, as the Lord came to the Nephites in 3 Nephi 11, so he will come again to usher in his millennial reign in power and great glory. The books of Helaman and 3 Nephi are a type or a foreshadow of the Lord’s Second Coming to our generation.

A careful study of President Benson’s addresses reveals a continual appeal to us to study the Book of Mormon, which testifies that its teachings parallel our day. For example, during the 1988 October general conference, he testified that wickedness was rapidly expanding in every segment of our society.

Then, alluding to the Book of Mormon, President Benson said that modern society's problems are "more highly organized, more cleverly disguised, and more powerfully promoted than ever before," including secret combinations which flourish because of lust for power and gain ("I Testify" 87). Elder Bruce R. McConkie has also prophesied, "Bands of Gadianton robbers will infest every nation, immorality and murder and crime will increase, and it will seem as though every man's hand is against his brother" (93).

President Benson has also called pride the universal sin. He noted in April of 1989 that the Nephites had fallen because of pride ("Beware of Pride" 4). Quoting the Book of Mormon, including passages from the book of Helaman, he prophetically said, "My dear brethren and sisters, we must prepare to redeem Zion. It was essentially the sin of pride that kept us from establishing Zion in the days of the Prophet Joseph Smith. It was the same sin of pride that brought consecration to an end among the Nephites (see 4 Nephi 1:24-25). Pride is the great stumbling block to Zion. I repeat: Pride is the great stumbling block to Zion. We must cleanse the inner vessel by conquering pride" (7). According to President Benson, the pride manifested in many aspects of our lives prevents us from repenting of our sins. "Essentially, pride is a 'my will' rather than 'thy will' approach to life. The opposite of pride is humbleness, meekness, submissiveness (see Alma 13:28), or teachableness" ("Cleansing the Inner Vessel" 6).

Throughout President Benson's administration, he has counseled priesthood leaders that the most important thing they could do for their people is study the scriptures ("The Power of the Word" 81). He has shared his hope and vision of the Church today being filled with home teachers, visiting teachers, ward and stake leaders counseling the Saints out of the scriptures especially the Book of Mormon to bring them nearer to God ("Flooding the Earth" 6). The word of God contains the answers to keep their flocks safe from the wolves. Comparing the book of Helaman to our day, President Benson said, "Are there

members of your flock who are deep in sin and need to pull themselves back? Helaman's promise is for them; 'Yea, we see that whosoever will may lay hold upon the word of God, which is quick and powerful, which shall divide asunder all the cunning and the snares and the wiles of the devil' (Hel 3:29)" ("The Power of the Word" 82). Church members and priesthood leaders need to be obedient to President Benson's counsel to study the scriptures for themselves, in preparation for their church callings and in their families in order to have the power of the Spirit to accomplish the great latter-day work of bringing souls to Christ like the leaders in the Book of Mormon.

Conclusion

Throughout President Benson's tenure as the prophet he has counseled that we must all come to Christ. He has pleaded with the Saints to cleanse the inner vessel, meaning their lives in the Church. He said, "As we cleanse the inner vessel, there will have to be changes made in our own personal lives, in our families and in the Church. The proud do not change to improve, but defend their position by rationalizing. Repentance means change, and it take a humble person to change" ("Cleansing the Inner Vessel" 7). One of the ways we can motivate ourselves to repent is to learn from the mistakes of the unrepentant Nephites in the book of Helaman.

The pattern of spiritual and temporal decline in the book of Helaman is sobering when considered as a type of our day. Helaman's record becomes a warning to us of similar spiritual problems preceding the coming of the Lord in the future. The Nephites became impenitent and grossly wicked after they rejected the gospel offered them through prophetic leadership and the preaching of the word. The problems of contention, pride, secret combinations, and wickedness brought spiritual weakness and eventual destruction to the Nephite civilization.

The only way their prophetic leaders were able to recover them was through preaching the word of God with power and

authority. Since the people had rejected the word, it follows that to reclaim them spiritually they had to be reminded of their covenants through the teaching of the word of God. The Book of Mormon shows that there is a great tendency for success through this method. The book of Helaman reminds us, however, that preaching the word to someone does not override that person's agency. Still, it functions as a type and model in reaching those who are unaware of the gospel and in reclaiming less active Latter-day Saints before the Lord comes to this generation.

The message of the book of Helaman is clear. The people who were worthy to stand at the temple in Bountiful to thrust their hands into the Savior's wounds were those who had accepted the preaching of the word and remained true to the covenants of the Lord. Those who were destroyed were those who rejected the word of God, refusing to live according to the commandments or covenants of the Lord. It will be the same when the Lord comes again.

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